

LESSON 20

Esther 2:10-14

10 Esther had not shewed her people nor her kindred: for Mordecai had charged her that she should not shew it. 11 And Mordecai walked every day before the court of the women's house, to know how Esther did, and what should become of her. 12 Now when every maid's turn was come to go in to king Ahasuerus, after that she had been twelve months, according to the manner of the women, (for so were the days of their purifications accomplished, to wit, six months with oil of myrrh, and six months with sweet odours, and with other things for the purifying of the women;) 13 Then thus came every maiden unto the king; whatsoever she desired was given her to go with her out of the house of the women unto the king's house. 14 In the evening she went, and on the morrow she returned into the second house of the women, to the custody of Shaashgaz, the king's chamberlain, which kept the concubines: she came in unto the king no more, except the king delighted in her, and that she were called by name.

We are not told why Mordecai told Esther to conceal her identity, even though it would almost certainly require her to compromise her fidelity to the Law. (Daniel, for example, did not conceal his identity, but rather seems to have proclaimed it to everyone who would listen.)

Some suggest that Esther would have had no chance of becoming queen had her nationality been known. But would that mean that Mordecai was acting out of personal ambition? One commentator wrote:

“These events came at a tragic time when many Jews (perhaps most) had forgotten their calling to separateness and had chosen to compromise their religious heritage for the sake of personal advancement under Persian domination.”

Could that charge be true of Mordecai? The text does not tell us. We are not told Mordecai's motives. We are not told that God was directing Mordecai's actions. We are not told that Mordecai was following the law. We are not told any extenuating circumstances that might help us explain why Mordecai does what he does here. All we see is what Mordecai does; we are not told why he does it.

Knowledge of Esther's identity might easily have proved very dangerous to her. We see anti-Semitism in this book, and Haman might not have been the only one who felt that way about the Jews and who was prepared to act on it.

In fact, as we will see, Haman's immediate reaction to being insulted by a Jew is to strike out against all the Jews in the land.

And so Mordecai likely had good reason to fear for Esther's safety, and particularly so if the now banished Vashti was the evil vengeful Amestris. The fact that Mordecai checked on Esther daily shows that he was very concerned about her.

Verses 12-14 reveal the process by which the girls were presented to the king. Apparently, most of the girls spent only a single night with the king, after which they moved to the house of Shaashgaz and became a concubine.

The "second house" or "second harem" in verse 14 likely means either a second group of women, or a separate wing in the harem complex.

There was no guarantee that the king would ever call them again, which meant they would be confined to what one commentator called "perpetual widowhood." After one night with the king, most of them would live the rest of their lives secluded in the harem.

The text is showing us here that the odds were heavily stacked against Esther. How could such a marginalized person in a hostile world ever make a difference for God? Only by a great reversal!

One commentator rightly reminds us that these verses highlight the inhumanity of polygamy.

When we think of polygamy, we usually think of the Mormons. Joseph Smith reportedly referred to polygamy as "the most holy and important doctrine ever revealed to man on earth." But, of course, that "most holy and important doctrine" was quickly abandoned by most Mormons when it came to a choice between it and Utah becoming a state.

There are still some Mormons who practice polygamy, most notably the group led by Warren Jeffs, who is now jailed in Texas for his sexual abuse of children. We don't have time to say much about this now, but one thing is certain – the most reliable indicator of a man-made religion is that religions' view of sex, and particularly when there is a so-called "special revelation" from God for its leader or leaders to engage in sexual immorality. Muhammad claimed to have received such a revelation, as did both Joseph Smith and David Koresh.

Esther 2:15-18

15 Now when the turn of Esther, the daughter of Abihail the uncle of Mordecai, who had taken her for his daughter, was come to go in unto the king, she required nothing but what Hegai the king's chamberlain, the keeper of the women, appointed. And Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her. 16 So Esther was taken unto king Ahasuerus into his house royal in the tenth month, which is the month Tebeth, in the seventh year of his reign. 17 And the king loved Esther above all the women, and she obtained grace and favour in his sight more than all the virgins; so that he set the royal crown upon her head, and made her queen instead of Vashti. 18 Then the king made a great feast unto all his princes and his servants, even Esther's feast; and he made a release to the provinces, and gave gifts, according to the state of the king.

We need to pause and consider an important question that we have only hinted at so far in our discussion – is Esther portrayed here as a **positive** example or as a **negative** example?

For many, the question itself is surprising – is there any doubt that Esther is a positive role model? Yes, there is doubt, at least by some.

And remember that the inspired text has carefully concealed and will continue to conceal Esther's thoughts and motivations from us. We see her actions, but we are not told **why** she acted that way. And, quite frankly, she does not seem to rise to her high position by consistent obedience to the Law as, for example, Joseph did in Egypt or Daniel did in Babylon.

Here is what one modern commentator has said on this issue:

“How would you use this episode from Esther's life to teach virtue to your teenage daughter? What message would she get? Make yourself as attractive as possible to powerful men? Use your body to advance God's kingdom? The end justifies the means?”

Did Esther initially hide her identity rather than face persecution as a child of God, as some suggest? Did she engage in situational ethics, as others argue? We know that she will soon take a very courageous stand, but is Esther being courageous here?

Here is a very harsh quote from a 15th century Jewish commentator:

“Now when Mordecai heard the king's herald announcing that whoever had a daughter or a sister should bring her to the king to have intercourse with an uncircumcised heathen, why did he not

risk his life to take her to some deserted place to hide until the danger would pass? He should have been killed rather than submit to such an act. Why did Mordecai not keep righteous Esther from idol worship? Why was he not more careful? Where was his righteousness, his piety, and his valor? Esther too should by right have tried to commit suicide before allowing herself to have intercourse with Xerxes.”

The text makes no attempt to vindicate Esther by explaining the extenuating circumstances or by reporting that she was operating under God’s special instructions. Later Greek translators added such explanations, even having Esther announce at one point that she abhorred “the bed of the uncircumcised.” But such is not part of the inspired text.

It cannot be an accident that the original text is silent on these questions. The reader is left to decide. Is Esther wholly righteous? Is she partly or maybe even mainly unrighteous? Did Esther start out unrighteous but later experience a reversal and become righteous?

Although we have some clues, the Bible does not explicitly answer those questions, either here or elsewhere. You will look in vain for Esther’s name on the roll call of faith in Hebrews 11 or anywhere else in the Bible outside of this book that bears her name.

Our list of friends say a lot about us, but so does our list of enemies. I think that was Jesus’ point in Luke 6.

Luke 6:26 - “Woe to you, when all people speak well of you, for so their fathers did to the false prophets.

Daniel had enemies. Joseph had enemies. Did Esther have any enemies? Verse 15 says that “Esther obtained favour in the sight of all them that looked upon her.” Daniel rocked the boat. Joseph rocked the boat. Did Esther ever rock the boat? As one commentary noted:

In order for Esther to have concealed her ethnic and religious identity in the harem, she must have eaten, dressed, and lived like a Persian rather than an observant Jewess.

We definitely see Esther’s righteousness and courage in the book, but we may also see the opposite. And, if so, would that be surprising? How many Old Testament characters are presented as wholly righteous? A few, but not many. Don’t we more often than not see negative qualities mixed with the positive?

Also, we are in fact given one reason why Esther was doing what she was doing – she was obeying Mordecai.

As for the intercourse with Xerxes, I think the Jewish scholar had at least one thing right – it would have cost Esther her life to refuse. And perhaps God did not want Esther to pay that price because God had other plans for Esther.

The ultimate answer to the question of Esther's character is to see the providence of God working in her life and in the events of this book. Whether righteous or not, God was able to use Esther to advance his plans for his people – and that is something we see God doing all throughout the Bible.

After the 12-month beauty treatment in verse 12, Esther is finally taken before the king in verse 16. She took with her only what Hegai suggested, perhaps trusting that he knew best what would please the king.

The tenth month was a cold, wet month in the middle of winter. The seventh year would have been 479 BC. As for why it took four years to replace Vashti, the king was away in Greece for two of these four years.

Verse 17 is a key verse in these events – King Xerxes made Esther queen instead of Vashti.

Those who believe that the book of Esther is fiction argue that these events are similar to *A Thousand and One Nights*. But in that folk tale, King Shekriya enjoyed a different bride every night, only to have her executed the next morning, which is quite different from what we read here. Again, the book of Esther is presented to us in the Bible as historical fact, and there is no reason to take it any other way.

This sudden decision suggests that the king was overwhelmed by Esther's beauty, and may explain why he chose a queen outside of the leading Persian families. Although Esther was no doubt beautiful, I think we also see here the providence of God working through Xerxes, just as God's providence had worked through Cyrus and through Pharaoh.

How does God's providence work? That is a difficult question. The best answer to that question comes from seeing examples of God's providence such as the one here.

Is God providing for his people in the book of Esther with miraculous signs and wonders? No. Is God providing for his people in the book of Esther? Absolutely.

We see God at work in all of these events, and that is why Esther is such a modern book. It is showing us how God works today, and has always worked, to provide for his people.

Miracles have come and are now gone, but God's providence has never gone. We see it in the Garden. We see it in Esther. We see it today. God has always worked to provide for his people. The age of miracles has ended, but the age of providence will never end!

The author avoids the word "marriage," although it is implied. Some commentators argue that it was a marriage beyond her control and therefore not a true marriage at all. Certainly Esther's only other choice at this point would have been death.

It is interesting to note that Jewish Esther married Gentile Xerxes at about the same time that intermarriage between Jews and Gentiles became an issue among the Jews who had returned to Jerusalem. When we get back to Ezra 9 and 10, we will see Ezra's harsh condemnation of the mixed marriages and his insistence that they divorce. How would Ezra have judged this Jewish queen?

What was Esther herself thinking about all of this? Had she been swept off her feet by the attention of the most powerful man on earth? Or was she wondering why God had allowed such a horrible thing to happen to her? We are not told.

To celebrate, the king gave a great feast (one of our themes!), and the king granted a "release" in verse 18. The Hebrew word literally means "a causing to rest." It could mean a "holiday," a "remission of taxes," or "amnesty." When the false Smerdis ascended the throne, Herodotus tells us that he granted his subjects freedom from taxation and military service for a period of three years, so perhaps that is what it means here. If it did mean a remission of taxes, then no doubt it caused all of the people to love Esther as much as the king did!

The Hebrew word translated "gifts" in verse 18 literally means "portions," and the meaning is not entirely clear.

It is interesting how often the people of God found themselves in royal courts. Joseph and Moses went before Pharaoh, Daniel went before Nebuchadnezzar, and now Esther goes before Xerxes. Many prophets appeared in royal courts when charged by God to speak truth to power.

As Christians, we should never shy away from opportunities to do likewise. Who knows but that we might have come to that position for such a time as this?

For those who don't believe God's people should ever be involved in politics, I'm glad they didn't convince Esther or Joseph or Daniel of that! Christians belong wherever the battle is raging!

Esther 2:19-20

19 And when the virgins were gathered together the second time, then Mordecai sat in the king's gate. 20 Esther had not yet shewed her kindred nor her people; as Mordecai had charged her: for Esther did the commandment of Mordecai, like as when she was brought up with him.

What does verse 19 mean when it says that the virgins were gathered together "the second time"? It is a difficult phrase, and it caused one commentary to declare that "verse 19 is one of the most difficult verses in all of Esther."

Here are the main theories:

- The second gathering was a gathering that followed Esther's selection as queen (with Esther's gathering being the first gathering).
- The second gathering was the gathering that occurred in the second house from verse 14.
- The second gathering was the gathering for Esther, while the first gathering must have been for Vashti.
- The Hebrew word translated "second" is close to the Hebrew word for "different," and so the original may have just said that they had gathered together at a different time.

I think the first view is the best view - the second time in verse 19 refers to a second gathering of the virgins after Esther became queen. Most likely it was a second procession of the unsuccessful contestants, perhaps intended to highlight Esther's beauty in comparison to theirs.

That Mordecai was sitting at the king's gate tells us that he was an official of some sort. One commentator suggests that after Esther became queen she had Mordecai appointed a magistrate or a judge.

The king's gate was a building with a gate within it and in which legal, civil, and commercial business

was conducted. The foundations of this gate have been located at Susa (in present day Iran), and it measures 131 by 92 feet. (See the earlier handout.) It consisted of a central hall that led into the royal compound and two rectangular side rooms. The evidence from the excavation of the gate and the palace corresponds well with the details given in Esther.

In verse 20 we are again reminded of Mordecai's command to Esther that she not reveal her identity. And we see no effort by Esther to get him to change his mind.

Later we will see Mordecai command Esther to reveal her identity – and that is when Esther will finally stand up to him and try to talk him out of it! In fact, the only time in the entire book when Esther raises any protest at all to Mordecai is found later in 4:11 where Esther protests, not Mordecai's instruction to keep her heritage hidden, but rather his command (4:8) that she reveal her heritage to the king. Again, it raises some questions about Esther.

After those events, we will see, not Mordecai commanding Esther, but rather Esther commanding Mordecai, which will be yet another example of our theme of reversal.

Esther 2:21-23

21 In those days, while Mordecai sat in the king's gate, two of the king's chamberlains, Bigthan and Teresh, of those which kept the door, were wroth, and sought to lay hand on the king Ahasuerus. 22 And the thing was known to Mordecai, who told it unto Esther the queen; and Esther certified the king thereof in Mordecai's name. 23 And when inquisition was made of the matter, it was found out; therefore they were both hanged on a tree: and it was written in the book of the chronicles before the king.

Why did these two eunuchs become angry? We are not told, but remember that between these events and the events in Chapter 1, the king had been humiliated in a battle against the Greeks. That humiliation may have caused this anger. We know that the king was eventually assassinated many years later under very similar circumstances.

Mordecai hears of the plot, and he tells Esther, who then tells the king. The conspirators are hanged on a tree, which may refer to death by impalement, and the events are recorded in the book of chronicles before the king.

According to Herodotus, "whenever Xerxes saw one of his officers behaving with distinction, he

would find out his name, and his secretaries wrote it down, together with his city and parentage.”

Verse 22 tells us something very important about Esther – she gave credit where credit was due. And if she had not done so, these events would have turned out very differently. And there are some lessons for us here.

First, the obvious lesson is that we should also give credit where credit is due and not take unearned honors upon ourselves.

But there is also a second lesson – our seemingly small acts of integrity (which may seem like nothing to us at the time) can have huge unforeseen impacts on our lives and the lives of others – as can our seemingly small (seemingly to us anyway) acts of disobedience.

We are not living in a vacuum. People see what we do and how we live. They see our actions, they hear our words, and they perceive our priorities. Everything we do, either good or bad, creates a ripple. We need to be sure we are creating good ripples.

We don’t know where those ripples are leading or how long they are lasting. What may seem small to us at the time may be just the thing that God will use later to turn the world upside down! We cannot see the resulting chain of events, but God can.

God plays a perfect game of chess. When we make a move, God can see all of the resulting moves all the way to the end of the game. We can see only a few moves ahead, but God can see all the way to the end, and beyond.

Rather than saying that God is the perfect chess player, perhaps a better analogy is to say that God is the perfect chess coach. God is telling us through his word what moves we should make. Are we going to trust ourselves, only being able to see a few moves ahead at most, or are we going to trust God who can see everything?

The “butterfly effect” refers to the idea that small causes can have large effects – such as the wind movements created by the beating of butterfly wings leading eventually to a hurricane on the other side of the globe.

The problem is that we can’t tell which events in our lives will experience that effect. Most of them seem small at the time, but some of them may be the first wing flap that leads to a hurricane. This small decision by Esther in verse 22 to give credit to Mordecai eventually leads to the salvation of the

Jewish people from an evil plot to destroy them all.

So where are we at the end of Esther 2? Queen Vashti has been replaced by Queen Esther, and Mordecai, having risen to a level of prominence, saved the king's life and has his deeds recorded in the king's book of chronicles.

What happens next? We finally meet the villain in Chapter 3.

Esther 3:1

After these things did king Ahasuerus promote Haman the son of Hammedatha the Agagite, and advanced him, and set his seat above all the princes that were with him.

In verse 1, we are introduced to Haman.

When Jews today celebrate the feast of Purim, the children are given noisemakers to use while the book of Esther is read, and they try to drown out the reader with noise every time Haman's name is mentioned. (I am not recommending that we follow that custom this morning!)

We are not told why Haman is honored in this way, but it is interesting that the text places the promotion of Haman just where a reader would expect to see Mordecai's promotion for foiling the plot against the king's life.

Haman is promoted to be second only to the king, while Mordecai appears to go unrewarded. Mordecai saves the king, and Haman is promoted. Did that create some resentment in Mordecai? We are not told.

When Haman is introduced, he is identified as an Agagite (which is one of the most important words in the entire book).

This reference to Haman's nationality hints at a conflict that by this time was already centuries old. (Which in terms of Middle East conflicts is just like yesterday!)

Recall that when Mordecai was introduced in Chapter 2, he was described in a way that would have caused any Jew to immediately think of King Saul. We wondered at the time why that was so, and now we will get the answer.

There is perhaps not a single word in Esther that comes with more baggage than does the word Agagite in Esther 3:1.

Haman was an Agagite, and Agag was the king of the Amalekites at the time that Saul was the first king of Israel.

The Amalekites had the dubious distinction of being the first nation to attack and try to destroy God's newly formed covenant nation. In response, God promised Moses that he would completely destroy the Amalekites and be at war with them from generation to generation.

Exodus 17:14-16 - Then the LORD said to Moses, "Write this as a memorial in a book and recite it in the ears of Joshua, that I will utterly blot out the memory of Amalek from under heaven." And Moses built an altar and called the name of it, The LORD Is My Banner, saying, "A hand upon the throne of the LORD! The LORD will have war with Amalek from generation to generation."

Balaam's oracle in Numbers 24 predicted that the Israelite king would be greater than Agag (the Amalekite king).

Numbers 24:7 - Water shall flow from his buckets, and his seed shall be in many waters; his king shall be higher than Agag, and his kingdom shall be exalted.

Later, God instructed King Saul to attack the Amalekites and totally destroy everything that belonged to them.

1 Samuel 15:1-3 - And Samuel said to Saul, "The LORD sent me to anoint you king over his people Israel; now therefore listen to the words of the LORD. Thus says the LORD of hosts, 'I have noted what Amalek did to Israel in opposing them on the way when they came up out of Egypt. Now go and strike Amalek and devote to destruction all that they have. Do not spare them, but kill both man and woman, child and infant, ox and sheep, camel and donkey.'"

Saul did attack them, but he spared the life of King Agag and kept the best of the sheep and the cattle, in disobedience to God's command.

1 Samuel 15:13-23 - And Samuel came to Saul, and Saul said to him, "Blessed be you to the LORD. I have performed the commandment of the LORD." And Samuel said, "What then is this bleating of the sheep in my ears and the lowing of the oxen that I hear?" Saul said, "They have

brought them from the Amalekites, for the people spared the best of the sheep and of the oxen to sacrifice to the LORD your God, and the rest we have devoted to destruction.” Then Samuel said to Saul, “Stop! I will tell you what the LORD said to me this night.” And he said to him, “Speak.” And Samuel said, “Though you are little in your own eyes, are you not the head of the tribes of Israel? The LORD anointed you king over Israel. And the LORD sent you on a mission and said, ‘Go, devote to destruction the sinners, the Amalekites, and fight against them until they are consumed.’ Why then did you not obey the voice of the LORD? Why did you pounce on the spoil and do what was evil in the sight of the LORD?” And Saul said to Samuel, “I have obeyed the voice of the LORD. I have gone on the mission on which the LORD sent me. I have brought Agag the king of Amalek, and I have devoted the Amalekites to destruction. But the people took of the spoil, sheep and oxen, the best of the things devoted to destruction, to sacrifice to the LORD your God in Gilgal.” And Samuel said, “Has the LORD as great delight in burnt offerings and sacrifices, as in obeying the voice of the LORD? Behold, to obey is better than sacrifice, and to listen than the fat of rams. For rebellion is as the sin of divination, and presumption is as iniquity and idolatry. Because you have rejected the word of the LORD, he has also rejected you from being king.”

Samuel hacked Agag to pieces before the LORD in Gilgal (1 Samuel 15:33).

And Saul was later killed by an Amalekite in 2 Samuel 1:1-16, which certainly drove home with some finality the lesson that he should have killed them all (although Saul himself played the key role in his own death).

God’s promise in Exodus 17 to be at war with the Amalekites in every generation had been given to Moses within the context of the old covenant being received at Sinai. Would that promise still stand for the Jews who were living in exile for having violated that same covenant? Could they expect God to remain faithful to his promises when they had not remained faithful to theirs? Would God finally give his people over to their ancient enemy? And would any of the events in this book have happened had King Saul not disobeyed God five centuries earlier?

These are the questions posed by the simple identification of Haman as an Agagite in verse 1.

#ezra-esther